DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 775 CS 507 562

AUTHOR Pelias, Mary Hinchcliff
TITLE Intervention Techniques for the Reduction of Communication Apprehension in the Basic Oral Communication Course: Some Practical Guidelines.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Communication Apprehension; Communication Problems; Higher Education; *Speech Communication; *Speech Instruction; *Speech Skills; Teaching Methods; Undergraduate Students; Visualization
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies; Speech Communication Education

ABSTRACT

Numerous studies indicate that communication apprehension can and does have considerable negative consequences for college students so affected. There are strategies that can be undertaken in the classroom that may help alleviate communication apprehension for some students. Classroom instructors must first recognize how students are processing their own communication apprehension. Basically, students will either be apprehensive or not, and will possess adequate performance abilities or not. The first general strategy is visualization which combines systematic desensitization and positive thinking. The second strategy is skills training. In-class activities designed to address students' skills deficiencies should be selected based on relevancy of those skills to the immediate task. Commonly used approaches based in oral communication skills training which address communication apprehension include social/conversational skills training, assertiveness training, rhetoritherapy, and oral interpretation/aesthetic performance skills training. Four criteria for appropriate classroom activities for remediation of communication apprehension are: (1) relevancy; (2) appropriate comfort level; (3) whole class involvement; and (4) some non-graded activities. If these intervention strategies are undertaken with enthusiasm and caution, some measure of successful reduction of students' communication apprehension likely will be realized. (Two notes are included; 52 references are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED336775

Intervention Techniques for the Reduction of Communication Apprehension in the Basic Oral Communication Course: Some Practical Guidelines

Mary Hinchcliff Pelias
Associate Professor, Department of Speech Communication
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901

Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association Conference, April, 1991, Chicago, IL.

CS507563

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mary Hinchcliff Pelias
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Intervention Techniques for the Reduction of Communication Apprehension in the Basic Oral Communication Course: Some Practical Guidelines

It has been estimated that in any given college/university classroom, ten to twenty percent of the students have a high degree of apprehension about communicating (McCroskey, 1977a; Page, 1984). Most likely, this estimate is conservative. Intuition and experience tell us that in oral communication classrooms where performance is an integral component, the incidence of communication apprehension (hereafter refered to as CA) is often higher than this figure (Pelias, 1989; Pelias & Pelias, 1988; Washington, 1983).

Anxiety about public speaking tops the lists of fears of U.S. adults reported in such popular surveys as The Book of Lists (Wallechinsky, Wallace & Wallace, 1977) and The Bruskin Report (1977). Moreover, in a study of U.S. university students, speaking before a group was listed second in anxiety arousal only to crawling on a ledge high on a mountain side. Taking a final exam in an important course and being alone in the woods at night were both reported by those students participating in the study as substantially less anxiety provoking than presenting a public speech (Endler, Hunt & Rosenstein, 1962).

Any experience that can evoke such strong negative responses clearly must have a deleterious effect on our students. Indeed, numerous studies indicate that CA can and does have considerable negative consenquences for individuals so effected. Due to their CA, our students' willingness and/or abilities to effectively engage in social discourse is often diminished. Anxieties associated with commmunication performances may result in

students' avoidance or withdrawal from communication situations (Beatty, Kruger & Springhorn, 1976; McCroskey, 1977a; 1977b; McCroskey, Daly & Sorenson, 1976). However, in some instances withdrawal from social discourse may not be feasible for our students; they must and do perform. But research has shown that their communicative performances often differ from non-apprehensives.

When highly apprehensive students do perform, their communicative behaviors may be negatively effected in a number of ways. Verbal disfluencies (e.g., stuttering, mispronunciations, speech blocks, vocalized pauses) are likely to occur due to anxieties about performing (Baker, 1963; Goss, Thompson & Olds, 1978; Lerea, 1956; Mulac & Sherman, 1974; Pelias, 1989; Pelias & Pelias, 1986; Pelias & Pelias, 1988). Awkward or unnatural nonverbal behaviors (e.g., random pacing, fidgeting, stilted gestures, uncontrolled smiling, trembling, twitches) may be exhibited due to CA (Behnke, Beatty & Kitchens, 1978; McCroskey, 1976; Mulac & Sherman, 1974; Pelias, 1989; Pelias & Pelias, 1988). High apprehensives are more likely to use speech interjections (e.g., "you know?") (Powers, 1977) and to produce less comprehensive messages (Burgoon & Hale, 1983; Freimuth, 1976) than are their less apprehensive counterparts.

Speakers who are apprehensive generally tend to speak less frequently (if given a choice) and to speak for shorter durations than do less anxious speakers (Arnston, Mortenson & Lustig, 1980; Jordan & Powers, 1978; Lederman, 1983; Lustig, 1980; McCroskey, 1984; Pelias, 1989; Pelias & Pelias, 1988). Moreover, highly apprehensive communicators appear less capable of making effective performance decisions (e.g., speech and oral interpretation topics, speech introduction strategies, aesthetic movement)

than are moderate and low apprehensive performers (Beatty, 1988; Pelias & Pelias, 1986; Pelias & Pelias, 1988).

Clearly, CA is a concern for speech communication educators. Some colleges and universities offer special treatment and/or specialized instruction for communicatively apprehensive students (Foss, 1982; Kelly, 1989; Kelly, Duran & Stewart, 1990; Hoffmann & Sprague, 1982; Phillips, 1991). However, this isn't the case at many other institutions. Consequently, many instructors (most with little or no training in remediation of CA), are left on their own to cope with this problem (Ayres and Hopf, 1985). Short of gaining license as a practicing psychotherapist (and the concomitant advanced degree in clinical psychology) as has been suggested by Booth-Butterfield & Cottone (1991), what options are available for most classroom instructors?

Assuming that the instructor chooses to do something (i.e., to not ignore the problem), there are some strategies that can be undertaken in the classroom that may help alleviate some of the CA for some of the students. Note the emphasis here. Not all of the students can be helped with the strategies suggested in this paper. Moreover, it is unlikely in a relatively short period of time (i.e., the time frame of a semester or quarter-long course) for any remediation to competely eradicate an individual's anxieties related to communication performance. However, the anxieties may be reduced to a more managable, less discomforting level. None of the strategies suggested in this paper should harm any individual. These techniques are not therapy. They cannot replace psychotherapy for students who desire that level of help with their psycho-communicative problematic behaviors. They are, simply put, classroom activities that may help students

to gain the skills and the confidence to approach oral performances with less apprehension.

Some Guidelines for the Classroom Instructor

First, it is important that the classroom instructor recognize how the students are processing their own CA. CA, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1977a, p. 78). McCroskey makes a distinction between "rational" CA and "nonrational" CA (1984, p. 30). Rational CA refers to a consistency between expectations and abilities (e.g., an individual who lacks requisite skills to prepare and present a speech is apprehensive about performing a speech). Conversely, nonrational CA can be seen as unjustified expectations when paired with given abilities (e.g., an individual skilled in public speaking is apprehensive about delivering a speech). Given this framework, four conditions delineated by McCroskey (1984) can serve as useful categories for understanding how our students experience CA.

Basically, students will either be apprehensive or not, and will possess adequate performance abilities or not. When the possible pairing of these expectations and abilities are permuted, four categories of student performers emerge. We find those students who are: (1) apprehensive about performing and who lack adequate performance skills, (2) apprehensive about performing and who possess adequate performance skills, (3) not apprehensive about performing and who lack adequate performance skills, and (4) not apprehensive about performing and who possess adequate performance skills.

The students who fit into the fourth category (i.e., not apprehensive, skilled communicators) are not a problem; they may participate in the

classroom activities used to reduce CA with no harm done and little change other than maturation, increased skills development, and increased awareness of their own abilities. The students who lack adequate performance skills (both apprehensive and nonapprehensive) will benefit from the skills training involved in the classroom exercises. This extra training, in addition to maturation, may move them to the skills proficient categories. The students who are apprehensive about performing, in addition to maturation and skills development, may alter their expectations for performance. Thus, the strategies used in the classroom should be such that they both increase students' skills levels and, concomitantly, make consistent their performance expectations (e.g., "I can do it, and I'm not too anxious about it."). Suggested classroom strategies to reach these desired conditions follow.

Selected Classroom Strategies

Two general strategies are suggested in this paper: the use of visualization and the selective use of skills training. Combined, these two approaches should make some positive difference in the level of CA experienced in the classroom. A description of these approaches follows.

Visualization

Visualization, as conceived by Ayres and his associate, Hopf (Ayres, 1988; Ayres & Hopf, 1985; 1987; 1989), was developed for use in normal classroom settings. This technique, easily employed in the classroom, requires the use of brief (i.e., approximately 30 minutes in length) written scripts prepared for a communication context in which students are be expected to perform (e.g., impromptu speech, informative speech). Students are asked to relax while either: (1) the instructor reads the script to them, or (2) they read the script in conjunction with preparation for their

performances. During the script reading, the students are asked to visualize themselves successfully completing the targeted communication task. Embedded in the scripts are positive statements regarding the speaker and the communication context. Extant scripts may be used (see Ayres & Hopf, 1989) or individual instructors may create scripts for specific classroom performance assignments. Simply put, this technique borrows an element of systematic desensitization (visualization) and pairs it with positive thinking. It apparently works. Students have successfully lowered their CA with visualization(Ayers, 1988; Ayers & Hopf, 1985; 1987; 1989; 1990) this technique appears to yield favorable and fairly stable (i.e., long term) results (Ayers & Hopf, 1990).[1]

Skills Training

The developmental approach often taken in traditional performance instruction in the communication classroom may well fall under the rubric of skills training. Indeed, traditionally, CA and related communication problems have been dealt with in this manner (Brooks & Platz, 1968; Furr, 1970; Foss, 1982). However, as Klopf & Cambra observe, for skills training to be successful in the reduction of CA, the methods used need to zero in on specific targets for improvement. Once targeted deficiency areas are identified, relevant skills building activities can be incorporated into the in-class training. Relevancy is a key element here. In-class activities designed to address students' skills deficiencies should be selected based on relevancy of those skills to the immediate task. Students who are deficient in those skills requisite for a specific communication task (e.g., presenting a public speech) need to work on skills deemed integral to that task (e.g., preparing an effective speech introduction) rather than on those associated with more global communication demands.

Commonly used approaches based in oral communication skills training include social/conversational skills training (Connell & Borden, 1987; Marshall, Stoian & Andrews, 1977; Littlefield & Sellnow; 1987), assertiveness training (Deffenbacher & Payne, 1978; Rich & Schroeder, 1976), rhetoritherapy (Kelly, 1989; Kelly, Duran & Stewart, 1990; Phillips, 1991), and oral interpretation/aesthetic performance skills training (Hopf, 1970; Taugher, Koehler & Williams, 1981).[2]

Social/conversational skills training seeks to help apprehensives to develop a repertoire of communication behaviors appropriate for general and specific social-communicative situations. In assertiveness training, apprehensives are taught new ways to repond to communication situations, with particular emphasis on esteem and confidence building. Rhetoritherapy teaches apprehensive individuals communication skills specific to certain communication situations. Additionally, this method teaches individuals to change their beliefs about communication in order to to find communicating more rewarding. The oral interpretation approach teaches the apprehensive performer to assume personae of performed texts, thus freeing the individual from the responsibility of the anxiety (i.e., "It is not I, it is the character"). The assumption of this strategy is that the positive experience will transfer to other communication contexts.

Any one or combination of these approaches might be adapted and applied to meaningful classroom exercises and activities. This should allow individual classroom instructors to draw upon their own interests, expertise, and previous training in selection of activities. Adler (1980) offers some useful advice for selecting effective in-class strategies to manage reticence. The four stated criteria that follow for appropriate classroom activities for the remediation of CA are partially derived from his suggestions.

Criteria For Classroom Activities Related to Skills Training

1. Relevancy.

The activity used should be relevant to the subject being studied, which, in turn, should be relevant to the subject matter of the course. Students need to be able to generalize the successes they have with their skills building to the larger context of the course.

2. Appropriate Comfort Level.

The activity should not be highly stressful or anxiety-producing for the students. The notion of desensitization, where the anxious individual is gradually introduced to anxiety-provoking stimuli, might serve as a good reminder when selecting or developing activities that make performance demands on apprehensive students.

3. Whole Class Involvement.

An in-class activity should preferably involve the entire class in some manner. Isolating just a few individual students puts too much pressure on those students to perform. They are already apprehensive; this increased conspicuousness could heighten their anxiety. Moreover, students who are not involved in an activity in some capacity just do not have a comparable educational experience with those who are involved. Students who are initially reluctant to participate actively in an exercise can be given participant/observer functions to perform. This way, all are involved.

4. Some Non-Graded Activities.

The fear of negative evaluation related to communication performance can exacerbate students' CA. Activities will be most rewarding if they are not always directly tied to grades.

Conclusion

The suggestions made in this paper offer a few practical guidelines for in-class intervention for oral communication apprehension. Since no special laboratory is required, or no additional training is needed, the strategies outlined in this paper to reduce students's CA are accessible to all oral communication instructors. These techniques most likely will not fully eradicate the problem. However, if these intervention strategies are undertaken with enthusiam and caution, some measure of successful reduction of students' CA likely will be realized.

If we make the positive difference in even one student's access to social power through speaking up and speaking out, then it will be, most certainly, worth the effort.

REFERENCES

Adler, R.B. (1980). Integrating reticence management into the basic communication curriculum. Communication Education, 29, 215-228.

Arnston, P., Mortenson, D., & Lustig, M. (1980). Predispositions toward verbal behavior in task oriented interaction. Human Communication Research, 6, 239-252.

Ayres, J. (1988). Coping with speech anxiety: The power of positive thinking. Communication Education, 37, 289-296.

Ayres, J., & Hopf, T.S. (1985). Visualization: A means of reducing speech anxiety. Communication Education, 34, 318-323.

Ayres, J. & Hopf, T.S. (1987). Visualization, systematic desensitization, and rational emotive therapy: A comparative evaluation. Communication Education, 36, 236-240.

Ayres, J., & Hopf, T.S. (1989). Visualization: Is it more than extra-attention? Communication Education, 38, 1-5.

Ayres, J., & Hopf, T.S. (1990). The long-term effect of visualization in the classroom: A brief research note. Communication Education, 39, 75-78.

Baker, E.E. (1963). An experimental study of speech disturbance for the measurement of stage fright in the basic speech course. Southern Speech Journal, 29, 232-243.

Beatty, M.J. (1988). Public speaking apprehension, decision-making errors in the selection of speech introduction strategies and adherence to strategy. Communication Education, 37, 297-311

Beatty, M.J., Kruger, M.W., & Springhorn, R.G. (1976). Toward the development of cognitively experienced speech anxiety. Central States Speech Journal, 27, 181-185.

Behnke, R.R., Beatty, M.J., & Kitchens, J.T. (1978). Cognitively experienced speech anxiety as a predictor of trembling. Western Journal of Speech Communication, 42, 270-275.

Booth-Butterfield, S. & Cottone, R.R. (1991). Ethical issues in the treatment of communication apprehension and avoidance. Communication Education, 40, 172-179.

Brooks, W.D., & Platz, S.M. (1968). The effects of speech training upon self-concept as a communicator. Speech Teacher, 17, 44-49.

Burgoon, J.K., & Hale, J.L. (1983). Dimensions of communication reticence and their impact on verbal encoding. Communication Quarterly, 31, 302-312.

Connell, S.H. (1987). Incorporating treatment for communication apprehension into oral communication courses. Communication Education, 36, 56-61.

Deffenbacher, J.L. & Payne, D.M. (1978). Relationship of apprehension about communication to fear of negative evaluation and assertiveness. Psychological Reports, 42, 370.

Endler, N.S., Hunt, J.McV., & Rosenstein, A.J. (1962). An S-R inventory of anxiousness. Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, 536. Whole volume.

Foss, K.A. (1982). Communication apprehension: Resources for the instructor. Communication Education, 31, 195-203.

Freimuth, V.S. (1976). The effects of communication apprehension on communication effectiveness. Human Communication Research, 2, 289-298.

Furr, H.B. (1970). Influences of a course in speech communication on certain aspects of the self concept of college freshmen. Speech Teacher, 19, 26-31.

Goss, B., Thompson, M., & Olds, S. (1978). Behavioral support for systematic desensitization for communication apprehension. Human Communication Research, 4, 158-163.

Hoffmann, J., & Sprague, J. (1982). A survey of reticence and communication apprehension treatment programs at U.S. colleges and universities. Communication Education, 31, 185-193.

Hopf, T.S. (1970). Reticence and the oral interpretation teacher. Speech Teacher, 19, 268-271.

Jordan, W.J., & Powers, W.G. (1978). Verbal behavior as a function of apprehension and social context. Human Communication Research, 4, 294-300.

Kelly, L. (1989). Implementing a skills training program for reticent communicators. Communication Education, 38, 85-101.

Kelly, L., Duran, R.L., & Stewart, J. (1990). Rhetoritherapy revisited: A test of its effectiveness as a treatment for communication problems. Communication Education, 39, 207-226.

Klopf, D.W., & Cambra, R.E. (1991). Speaking skills for prospective teachers (2nd. ed.). Englewood, CO: Morton Publishing.

Lederman, L.C. (1983). High communication apprehensives talk about communication apprehension and its effects on their behavior. Communication Quarterly, 31, 233-237.

Lerea, L. (1956). A preliminary study of the verbal behavior of speech fright. Speech Monographs, 23, 229-233.

Littlefield, R.S., & Sellnow, T.L. (1987). The use of self-disclosure as a means for reducing stage fright in beginning speakers. Communication Education, 36, 62-64.

Lustig, M.W. (1980). Computer analysis of talk-silence patterns in triads. Communication Quarterly, 28, 3-12.

Marshall, W.L., Stoian, M., & Andrews, W.R. (1977). Skills training and self-administered desensitization in the reduction of public speaking anxiety. Behavior Research & Therapy, 15, 115-117.

McCroskey, J.C. (1984). The communication apprehensive perspective. In J.A.Daly & J.C. McCroskey (Eds.), Avoiding communication: Shyness, reticence, and communication apprehension (pp. 13-38). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

McCroskey, J.C. (1976). The effects of communication apprehension on nonverbal behavior. Communication Quarterly, 24, 39-44.

McCroskey, J.C. (1977a). Oral communication apprehension: A summary of recent theory and research. Human Communication Research, 4, 78-96.

McCroskey, J.C. (1977b). Classroom consequences of communication apprehension. Communication Education, 26, 27-33.

McCroskey, J.C., Daly, J.A. & Sorensen, G.A. (1976). Personality correlates of communication apprehension. Human Communication Research, 2, 376-380.

Mulac, A., & Sherman, A. (1974). Behavioral assessment of speech anxiety. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 60, 134-143.

Page, W.T. (1984). Helping the nervous presenter: Research and prescriptions. The Journal of Business Communication, 22, 9-19.

Pelias, M.H. (1989). Apprehension in the Classroom: The students speak. Journal of the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association, 60, 17-25.

Pelias, M.H., & Pelias, R.J. (1986, June). Theatrical performance apprehension: An analysis of personal narratives. Paper presented at the International Colloquium on Communication, Landau, Federal Republic of Germany.

Pelias, M.H. & Pelias, R.J. (1988). Communication Apprehension in the basic course in performance of literature. Communication Education, 37, 118-126.

Phillips, G.M. (1991). Communication incompetencies: A theory of training oral performance behavior. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Powers, W.G. (1977). The rhetorical interrogative: Anxiety or control? Human Communication Research, 4, 44-47.

Rich, A.R., & Schroeder, H.E. (1976). Research issues in assertiveness training. Psychological Bulletin, 83, 1081-1096.

Taugher, C.D., Koehler, J.W., & Williams, D.A. (1981, November). Effects of poetry as a therapeutic tool in the reduction of "situational" communication apprehension. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association conference, San Francisco, CA.

Wallechinsky, D., Wallace, I., & Wallace, A. (1977). The book of lists. New York: Bantam.

Washington, E.M. (1983). Choral reading, an aid to teaching novice oral interpretation students. Communication Education, 32, 117-121.

What are americans afraid of? (1973, July). The Bruskin Report, 53.

NOTE

[2]For a more detrailed explaination of the visualization technique, see Ayres & Hopf, 1985 (full citation listed in references).

[1]For an extensive review of the skills training approaches, see K. Foss, 1982 (full citation listed in references).